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■ For More Information See

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—Sketch by Diane Telgen

Washburn Rural
High School
Topeka, Kansas

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If you enjoy the works of Robin Cook, you may also want to check out the following:

Michael Crichton, *The Terminal Man*, 1972.
 Thomas M. Disch, *The M.D.*, 1991.
 Richard Preston, *The Hot Zone*, 1994.
 Leah Ruth Robinson, *Blood Run*, 1988.
 Steven Spruill, *Before I Wake*, 1992.
 F. Paul Wilson, *The Select*, 1994.
 R. D. Zimmerman, *Mindscream*, 1988.

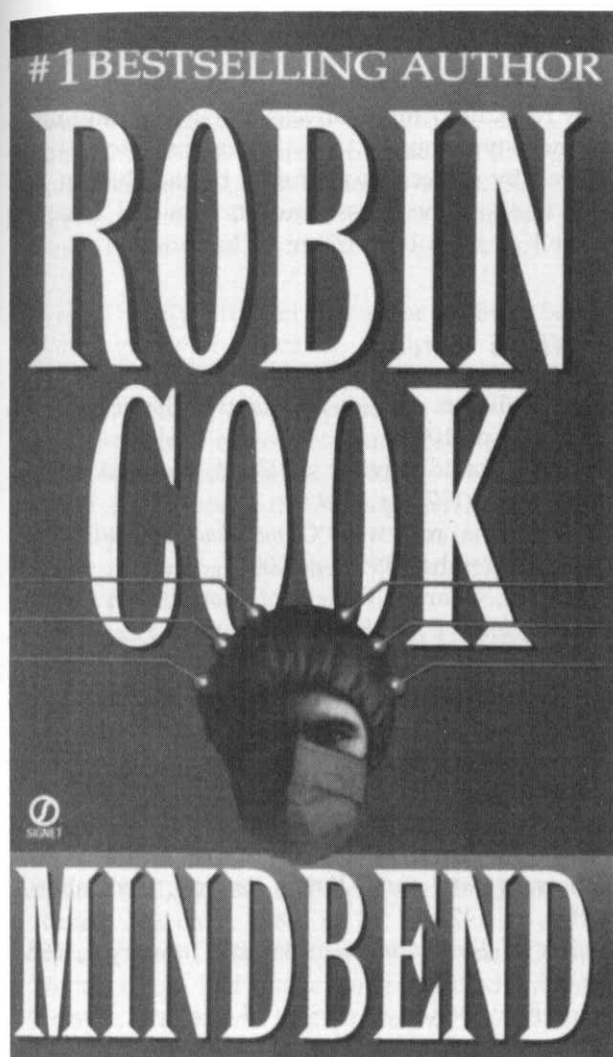
ardize even more lives. In *Vector*, the possibility of biological terrorism is what provides the subject of current interest. Medical examiner Jack Stapleton from *Contagion* returns and once again uncovers a plot to release a deadly disease among the populace—this time by a racist military group who has enlisted the help of a disillusioned Russian emigrant. While finding the plot marred by coincidence, a *Publishers Weekly* critic acknowledged that "Cook's biotechnology research is rewarding, [and] the pace is as pleasingly hectic as you'd expect from the author."

While Cook's novels follow a predictable pattern—a committed doctor uncovers a conspiracy to abuse medical science and overcomes danger to outwit the perpetrators—it is a formula whose variations allow him to address a variety of meaningful issues. While critics may sometimes fault his writing for its sketchy characterization, awkward dialogue, or outrageous plot twists, they cannot deny the appeal of his timely themes, flair for suspense, and ability to make modern medicine comprehensible. "The key to Cook's success," Jonathan Kellerman claimed in the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, "is his ability to tap the love-hate-terror relationship that exists between dispensers and recipients of health care—dredging up the helplessness that we feel when confronted by disease and disability." Writing in the same source, Charles Champlin similarly observed that "[the author's] storytelling is usually sited in the shock waves just ahead of the leading edge of medicine," thus ensuring an interesting tale. "Overall, while neither a versatile writer nor an impressive stylist, Cook is still very good at what he does," Gary Westfahl concluded, "which is all that patients want from a doctor, and all that many readers want from a novelist." As the author himself revealed in his CA interview, he writes not to impress reviewers, but to entertain as many

readers as possible: "My books are written as mystery thrillers and not written to be compared with Henry James or any other more literary writer. They're written more or less as current-day entertainment-type novels. . . . I like my books to be enjoyed by someone who might be the chief of surgery here at the Massachusetts General Hospital as well as by a bus driver in Indiana."

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Concern over the undue influence that pharmaceutical companies can have over doctors led the author to pen this tale of medical research and brainwashing.

Wilson. While noting that the novel suffers from a few flaws, a *Kirkus Reviews* writer observed that the author is "so canny in joining his trademark medical paranoia to his audience's likely alarm about draconian cutbacks under managed care that you can expect sales to go through the roof."

HMOs also play the villain in the 1995 novel *Contagion*. In this case, the profit involves the use of an old virus recovered from the frozen tundra; unfortunately for their victims, the virus is the same pneumonia that caused an epidemic during World War I. It is left up to Dr. Jack Stapleton to uncover the plot and prevent more deaths. *Contagion* is

"meticulous and suspenseful," according to Gary Westfahl, who found the novel one of Cook's more successful outings. The malignant side of medical research is explored in novels like *Acceptable Risk* and *Chromosome 6*. The first novel features a designer drug which seems to perform exactly as planned, except for one minor side-effect: at night the test subjects unwittingly assume monstrous forms and hunt for victims. *Chromosome 6*, as the title implies, is concerned with research into genetic manipulation. When a New York medical examiner is puzzled by a series of strange autopsy results, his investigations lead him to Africa, where a geneticist's experiments in cloning could lead to a dramatic change in the nature of humanity. While neither of these novels received excellent reviews, critics did observe that Cook once again uses themes and topics that are sure to intrigue readers.

In 1997 Cook used his medical knowledge as the starting point for a more speculative type of thriller. Like his other novels, *Invasion* includes an idealistic doctor and a potentially threatening medical puzzle—a spreading flu—but the cause of the problem is decidedly not natural. Beau Stark is the first to contract the illness, shortly after finding a mysterious black disk, and although he recovers from the flu he soon undergoes a mysterious physical transformation. As the "disease" spreads to some two-thirds of the world's population, Dr. Sheila Miller and others learn that the source of the virus is extraterrestrial, and that the epidemic is the first stage of an alien invasion. "Cook fans will revel in this story," William Beatty asserted in *Booklist*, calling *Invasion* a "pressure cooker of a thriller." The book marked a unique milestone for the author, as it was released almost simultaneously with a television miniseries based on the same story. As indicated by the title of the miniseries—*Robin Cook's Invasion*—Cook has achieved such popularity that the attachment of his name to an adaptation is considered an important selling point.

Society's growing concern over the spread of deadly diseases has made two of Cook's more recent books, *Toxin* and *Vector*, particularly timely. The former novel is reminiscent of Upton Sinclair's 1906 classic *The Jungle*, which exposed the unsanitary conditions of the meatpacking industry. In *Toxin*, the action starts after Dr. Kim Reggis's young daughter dies after eating a hamburger contaminated with deadly *E. coli* bacteria. As the doctor explores how such a lapse in health standards could have occurred, he discovers a conspiracy that could jeop-

sult, the critic concluded, "this is the best massage he has administered to our phobias in some time."

The potential abuse of medical research again forms the background in Cook's next novel, *Mortal Fear*. Dr. Jason Howard is troubled by the sudden loss of five patients who have suddenly died after showing signs of rapid aging. Howard comes to suspect the involvement of freelance researcher Dr. Alvin Hayes, on assignment with Howard's Boston employer, when Hayes suddenly and bloodily dies after trying to confide something to him. As Howard investigates Hayes's research into genetics, he finds a connection with the mysterious deaths that makes him the target of a psychopathic hit man. "This is Cook's best book since [*Coma*]," Susan Toepfer asserted in *People*. Chicago *Tribune Books* writer Randall K. Packer praised Cook's "flare for description," explaining that the author's writing is "rich in powerful imagery, and medical definitions are detailed yet easily understandable." While faulting the novel for some logical lapses and stiff characters, *Washington Post* contributor Larry Thompson nonetheless hailed Cook's "clean, economical writing style that holds the reader's attention and clearly explains complex science without taxing the mind."

Medicine, Malpractice, and Mutants

The timely subject of reproductive medicine provides the impetus for two more of Cook's medical thrillers. *Mutation* reworks the Frankenstein legend as infertility expert Dr. Victor Frank uses *in vitro* techniques to help his wife Marsha get pregnant. Unbeknownst to the happy mother, however, Dr. Frank has genetically manipulated the embryo in an attempt to create a superintelligent child. The experiment goes awry, however, and Marsha must use her own skills in psychology to save her family. "As in all his novels, this one is just logical enough to be *really* frightening," Brad Hooper noted in *Booklist*, an effectiveness supplemented by medical detail and "quick pacing." In 1990's *Vital Signs*, Dr. Marissa Blumenthal returns, now happily married and with a successful pediatrics practice. Marissa has had difficulty getting pregnant, however, and begins to investigate the fertility clinic where she is being treated after having no success. She finds a strange connection between the records of several patients—including hers—and an Australian fertility clinic in which her husband has invested. As she follows the clues to Australia and

the Far East, her life is endangered once again when she uncovers a billion-dollar scheme. "As always, Cook enlivens predictable action and shallow characterization with medical expertise and timely subject matter," a *Publishers Weekly* critic remarked. "*Vital Signs* is one wild, wild story," Joe Queenan stated in the *New York Times Book Review*, and praised Cook as "an original" who is "one of those endearingly zany writers who give the lie to the notion that fact is stranger than fiction."

In the 1989 novel *Harmful Intent*, Cook once again takes advantage of contemporary issues, in this case those of medical malpractice and legal liability. After one of his patients dies following a routine injection, anesthesiologist Jeffrey Rhodes is successfully sued for eleven million dollars and sentenced to jail. Bent on clearing his name, Rhodes jumps bail, assumes a disguise, and takes a janitor position at the hospital to investigate the death. With the assistance of a nurse, he uncovers a plot to collect money from litigation by framing several doctors for malpractice. Of course, his discoveries put Rhodes himself in jeopardy, as the killer seeks to eliminate him too. In an interview for *Bestsellers 90*, Cook explained the purpose of this book: "I wanted the public to view this medical malpractice situation from a different perspective, because the public has a gross misconception about what this medical malpractice problem is." While the critics were less impressed with this book, it fared well with the public; *Harmful Intent* stayed on the *New York Times* bestseller list for more than a month.

The economic pressures facing the medical profession again drive the action in two more novels, *Terminal* and *Fatal Cure*. In the former, intern (and reformed thief) Sean Murphy accepts a job with a cancer research center that has shown an amazing one hundred percent success rate in treating a type of brain cancer. When he finds himself shut out from the project, however, Sean investigates anyway and finds that the clinic's results may have been faked in order to elicit more funding. *Terminal* is "a manically entertaining thriller," a *Kirkus Reviews* critic asserted, one which will "chalk up another big one for Cook." A *Publishers Weekly* reviewer, while faulting the characters as one-dimensional, similarly concluded that the author "lures us into his newest medical thriller easily and sustains our interest until the very end." In *Fatal Cure* it is a greedy HMO behind the deadly medicine uncovered by married doctors Angela and David

Watkins similarly observed that *Fever* suffers from an excess of coincidence, but remarked that Cook makes up for it with "descriptions of the interaction between doctors and patients [that] are vivid and believable, as is his depiction of doctors' attitudes about cancer and its treatment." Joseph McLellan analyzed the appeal of Cook's medical thrillers and proposed that "the horrible revelations about the medical establishment . . . are the real payoff for reading his books." In his *Washington Post Book World* review, the critic explained that "what makes you start reading Cook is the expectation of horror and a glimpse behind the scenes at the medical establishment. Cook discovered some time ago that for the average person an active, well-lit modern hospital is infinitely spookier than a dark old abandoned house." As a result, McLellan added, "it will be hard for all but the most dedicated literary purist to put [*Fever*] down once they have begun." With its "masterfully suspenseful conclusion," a *Publishers Weekly* writer likewise concluded, *Fever* is "a hard-to-put-down, fast-paced thriller."

Hospital politics supplement the plot in Cook's next medical mystery, 1983's *Godplayer*. A conflict between resident physicians and private practitioners must be put aside when several cardiac surgery patients mysteriously die. As Doctors Cassandra Kingsley and Robert Seibert investigate, Cassi comes to suspect her increasingly erratic surgeon husband, and finally uncovers the terrible motive behind the deaths. "There is enough going on here to engage one until the end," Jonathan Coleman wrote in the *New York Times Book Review*, for "Dr. Cook is marvelous when he reveals the mysterious workings of the medical world." *New York Times* critic Lehmann-Haupt observed that the author's medical insight is able to overcome any literary weaknesses in characterization or plot: "Robin Cook will grab any medical device he can to get a reader's attention." As a result, Lehmann-Haupt wrote, "you get the feeling that . . . you are never going to be bored." Leola Floren, writing in the *Detroit News*, likewise found *Godplayer* a suspenseful story "guaranteed to keep medical-mystery lovers poised on the sleek points of steel pins and flashing hypodermic needles." As Gary Westfahl concluded, *Godplayer* is "an excellent novel" which "engrossingly depicts" how doctors can believe themselves above mere mortals even as they suffer from the same weaknesses.

The potentially perilous relationship between pharmaceutical companies and the medical profession

is developed in the 1985 novel *Mindbend*. When medical student Adam Schonberg's wife becomes pregnant and has to leave her job, debts force him to leave his studies and take a position with Arolin Pharmaceutical. While training, Adam discovers that his firm's medical seminars are being used to brainwash doctors into prescribing Arolin's drugs. In addition, he discovers that these physicians have begun working for a clinic sponsored by the company—the same clinic that his pregnant wife attends. The author admitted to Rovner that although the story is fictional, in reality many doctors rely heavily on pharmaceutical company representatives' knowledge. A scene in the book illustrating a meeting between a busy physician and a persuasive pharmaceutical salesperson, Cook contended in his *Washington Post* interview, "is just the way it happens. Don't think it isn't because the scene is faintly humorous. Some of the doctors are that stupid about drugs." *Washington Post Book World* contributor Michael A. Morrison credited Cook for writing on the "important and timely subject" of how business influences medicine, but felt that the book fails to convey the message effectively because it "retreats from this issue." The *Chicago Tribune's* Clarence Petersen, however, claimed the thrilling story line in *Mindbend* "is apt to keep you up reading all . . . night."

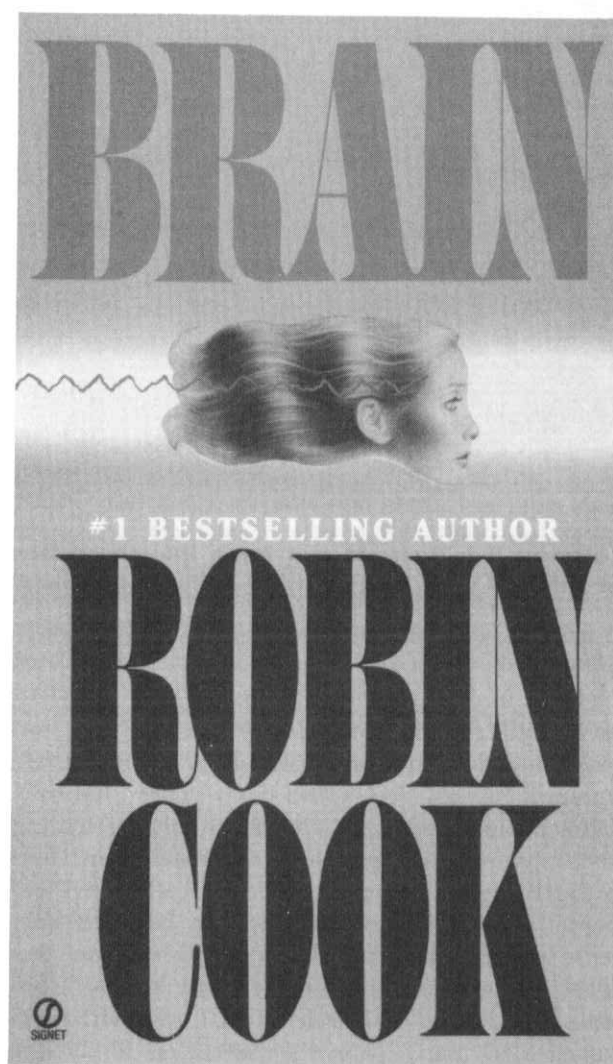
The plot of Cook's next novel, 1987's *Outbreak*, stems from the potential power and danger to be found in "the organized political clout of traditional medicine," as Marjorie Williams described it in the *Washington Post Book World*. Dr. Marissa Blumenthal has just joined the Epidemiology Intelligence Service, where her job is to trace the path of epidemics to their origin. A deadly, highly contagious virus has just broken out in cities across the United States, strangely beginning in each case with an ophthalmologist. As Marissa investigates, she finds a scheme by private practitioners to sabotage health maintenance organization (HMO) facilities and their employees. Marissa must uncover enough evidence to support her accusations and prevent an epidemic while trying to avoid the attentions of several hit men. While noting some stylistic flaws in *Outbreak*, *New York Times Book Review* contributor Donovan Fitzpatrick nevertheless asserted that "Mr. Cook is nimble at stitching together the ingredients of terror, suspense, intrigue and medical expertise." As Williams explained, "Cook has the knack, common to all good popular writers, of taking his subjects seriously"; as a re-

symptoms; these can only be treated by brain surgery, after which all of the women have mysteriously disappeared. As Dr. Phillips investigates, he discovers a sinister plot by researchers who want to profit from his computer program. Cook explained the issue behind this novel in his CA interview: "Researchers feel they're doing something so important that they don't have to be held to the same guidelines that other people are. . . . I see it all the time, even in clinical medicine, not only in research. That doesn't mean that everyone is like that, but I think that it is so rampant that it has to be brought out." *Brain* was another bestseller for Cook, and reviewers generally recognized its appeal. "The ingredients for a popular quick read are all there," including "several surprising twists," *School Library Journal* contributor Carol J. Saunders observed, while *New York Times* critic Christopher Lehmann-Haupt similarly noted that the novel is "very cleverly plotted." "Shall I say, 'I couldn't put the book down?'," William A. Nolen suggested in the *Washington Post Book World*. "Why not? It's true. Even though *Brain* is low-grade formula fiction . . . [it's] a damn fast read," containing a plot "with enough twists and turns to satisfy any reader." What makes *Brain* so "unnervingly plausible, deeply frightening—and possibly prophetic," according to *Los Angeles Times Book Review* contributor Rosalind Smith, is how the university medical center setting "is rendered with exquisite accuracy, from the bureaucratic regulations victimizing both patients and personnel to the atmosphere of the operating rooms and the laboratories."

Exposing Medicine's Cancers

Fever, Cook's third medical thriller, "once again pits an individual against a corrupt and incredulous establishment," as Mel Watkins described it in the *New York Times Book Review*. Medical researcher Dr. Charles Martel is having a very bad day. First, his employer forces him to switch the focus of his anti-cancer research from a promising immunological theory to a drug whose positive results were falsified by its previous developer. Next, he learns that his young daughter has been diagnosed with the same kind of leukemia that killed his first wife. When he discovers that the town's primary employer has been leaking the carcinogenic chemical benzene into a nearby river, he cannot get anyone to pay attention. The situation escalates as Dr. Martel discovers his research institute employer is owned by the same corporation that is polluting

the town, and he is prevented from supervising his daughter's treatment. As company thugs try to intimidate him, Martel must try to complete his own cancer research in time to save his daughter. While *New York Times* critic Christopher Lehmann-Haupt questioned whether "an intelligent reader [can] possibly believe all this stress and turmoil," he added that the author "has the storytelling skill to seduce us away from intelligence. . . . By the time *Fever* began to deteriorate into absolute absurdity, I was having too good a time to be willing to notice."



When medical researcher Dr. Martin Philips observes a strange correlation between abnormal brain scans and women whose minor ailments turn into severe neurological damage, it leads him to a startling discovery.



Genevieve Bujold starred as a young intern who faces a deadly conspiracy in the popular film version of *Coma*, the first in Cook's long string of bestselling medical thrillers.

lieving police and hospital officials of the conspiracy while avoiding becoming a victim of the criminals herself. *Best Sellers* contributor Charles J. Keffer pronounced *Coma* "an absolutely fascinating story" whose descriptions of technical terms and medical procedures lead to deep reader involvement. "I do not think anyone can beat the suspense and the story line developed throughout this novel," he explained. David Brudnoy similarly observed in the *National Review* that *Coma* "strikes to the core of many people's queasiness about the current debate as to when death occurs," making for "a horror story of the first order." "Along with its relentless pace and an almost-surprising final revelation," Gary Westfahl remarked in the *St. James Guide to Horror, Ghost, and Gothic Writers*, "*Coma* succeeds largely because its author is manifestly

used to working in hospitals and is conversant with their daily routines, varied personalities and petty politics, making the story seem completely plausible." Perhaps the primary reason for *Coma*'s success, however, is as Tina Burbine related in *Voice of Youth Advocates*: "The suspense and mystery in this book is so great that I could not put it down."

While Cook's next novel, *Sphinx*, was based on his interest in Egyptian history and anthropology, since then the majority of his thrillers have had a medical focus. In the 1981 novel *Brain*, the hero is Dr. Martin Phillips, a neuroradiologist who discovers a strange pattern in patient brain scans while developing a new diagnostic computer program. After seeking treatment for minor gynecological problems, several young women have developed strange neurological

■ Adaptations

Coma was adapted for film and released by United Artists, 1978; *Sphinx* was adapted for film by John Byrum and released by Orion, 1981; *Mutation* was adapted for film and released by Warner Brothers, 1990. *Outbreak* was produced as the television movie *Robin Cook's Virus*, NBC-TV, 1995 (the 1995 film *Outbreak* only licensed Cook's title and was based on different material); *Invasion* was produced as the television movie *Robin Cook's Invasion* in 1997. *Brain* and *Fever* have both been optioned for production as motion pictures. Several of Cook's novels are available on cassette.

■ Sidelights

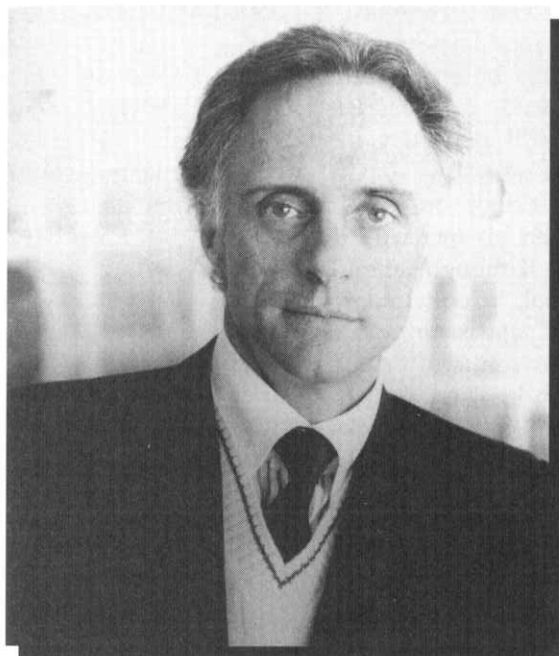
"I can't think of anything more fearsome than hospitals," bestselling author and eye surgeon Robin Cook told *People* interviewer Gail Jennes. "When people smell the alcohol and see the equipment, their pupils dilate. They go into a sweat. I need to evoke that atavistic fear of dying." Cook has done just that in a string of bestselling medical thrillers, pitting his protagonists against a heart-stopping series of egomaniacal researchers, profiteering HMOs, and greedy corporations. By showing the most fearsome results of modern medical technology, the author can inform readers about the important ethical and social issues facing doctors and patients today. "Practically nobody, including most doctors, pays attention to the problem or reads the editorials in the *New England Journal of Medicine*," Cook explained in a *Washington Post* interview with Sandy Rovner. "I decided early on that I would couch my stories as thrillers. It was an opportunity to get the public interested in things about medicine they didn't seem to know about." Cook's novels typically place an idealistic young doctor in a struggle against people who are abusing the medical establishment. "Cook's technique," as Rovner described it, "is to take a particular issue and weave it into a suspenseful, mildly sexual, occasionally gory story that requires little more than a two-hour investment and takes his medical 'problem' to a logical if fanciful conclusion."

Cook was born in New York City and raised in suburban New Jersey, where he had easy access to New York's sights and museums. "I was fascinated by the ancient world," he told Gail Jennes, and the mummy rooms at New York's Metropolitan Museum were a particular favorite. In high school,

however, the Egyptian history buff witnessed an injury at a local football game and decided that he wanted to become a doctor. He completed a pre-med course of study at Wesleyan University and then entered medical school at Columbia University. During his summer breaks he traveled to Monaco, where he worked as a lab assistant for underwater explorer Jacques Cousteau. He began a surgical residency in Honolulu after his graduation, and then was drafted into the navy. While his service on a submarine in the Pacific interrupted his medical training, it did have a side benefit. "I thought about writing when I was medical school," Cook told Jean W. Ross in an interview for *Contemporary Authors* (CA), "but it wasn't until I was drafted into the military that I had the time to do it. Then, suddenly, all I had was time." Over a period of six weeks he wrote a fictionalized account of a doctor's life in training, and shortly after he began his ophthalmological residency in Massachusetts the novel was published as *The Year of the Intern*.

While his publishing debut performed fairly well, earning him some fifty thousand dollars, Cook was still disappointed. He had hoped to write a smash hit, and so before attempting another work he decided to study up on what made a bestseller. When he wasn't practicing medicine, he spent time reading successful mysteries and thrillers, trying to discover what kinds of plots and characters were most appealing. He kept this in mind when coming up with the approach that has characterized most of his fiction: a combination of medicine, mystery, and murder that looks at the more sinister aspects of medical science. Looking at the ethical issues surrounding the development of new medical technologies is also an important component of his formula: "I was encouraged with the idea that the fictional form was a good medium for bringing out the kinds of issues I wanted to discuss," the author revealed in his CA interview. "I was committed so I was willing to put in the time even if it didn't get published."

The result of all his study and effort was a huge success: *Coma* not only reached the bestseller lists, it inspired a hit movie as well. The novel begins on intern Susan Wheeler's first day at Boston Memorial Hospital. As the young doctor attempts to find the reason why perfectly healthy people are suddenly falling into comas, she discovers a conspiracy to create a black market of human organs for transplant. Susan must try to convince unbe-



Robin Cook

■ Personal

Born May 4, 1940, in New York, New York; son of Edgar Lee (an artist) and Audrey (Koons) Cook; married Barbara Ellen Mouglin (an actress), July 18, 1979. *Education:* Wesleyan University, B.A., 1962; Columbia University, M.D., 1966; postgraduate study at Harvard University. *Hobbies and other interests:* Skiing, surfing, painting, cooking.

■ Addresses

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■ Career

Queen's Hospital, Honolulu, HI, resident in general surgery, 1966-68; Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary, Boston, resident in ophthalmology, 1971-75, staff member, 1975—. Clinical instructor at Harvard Medical School, beginning 1972. *Military service:* U.S. Navy, 1969-71; became lieutenant commander.

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